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THE TROUBLESOME LADY.

CHAPTER V.—CONTINUED.

One June day the doctor came into his friend's office in a jaunty gray suit with immaculate creases and a general air of fashion and newness quite dazzling.

"You must be going to be married," laughed Oliver. "Why this state?"

"A trip east, my boy. I want to breathe the fogs of my native state. My lungs are shriveled up. You never suspected I was born in Snowhegan, Me.; I never told you. It would have been such a background for feeble jokes. Besides, what man would want to see he was born in a place called Snowhegan? I had to be born somewhere, though, and Colorado is too young for me. The Achorns are an old family in Maine, and, though some of us call it Achorns, I like the old way. Please, your joke now—great oaks from little acorns grow."

"I'm too startled, too dazed by your decision. You haven't been east in fifteen years to my knowledge."

"Never too late to mend. Besides, I'm going to Neweastle. I would like to see how the Troublesome lady is, and her aunt. I like the aunt—good old New England kind, honest as the day, narrow, perhaps, but solid worth. In another generation those old maids will be as extinct as the dodo."

"It does not seem to me the proper thing to call on them when neither has sent us any word."

"That's Aunt Hannah, bless her good heart," smiled the doctor. "She looks on you with suspicion, Craig. For Mrs. Minny is a married woman, and down in Maine a married woman goes into her tomb when the service is over. Young girls may go to dances and other village jollifications, but a married woman's place is at home, doing the Napoleon and raising citizens. I like that law, too; it saves lots of trouble."

"Perhaps, but remember, Maine is prolific in divorce cases."

"Well, they live too shut in, folks do down there, and they are all opinionated and strong characters. I will write you from Neweastle, at all events."

This Dr. John did after a month. The letter brought a sense of uneasiness to Oliver, and the conviction that, with the best intentions in the world, he had done a great wrong. Mrs. Minny had never been heard from. Mrs. Patten had been at home some weeks at a time during the winter and spring, but would go off again, "wandering-like," Mr. Perkins said, and seemed not right in his mind. Mrs. Perkins took care of the cat and parrot, and she, too, affirmed that Miss Patten was queer and that she had remarked "it was wrong for dumb beasts and birds to be housed when her own dear niece—her only connection—was a homeless wanderer on the face of the earth."

Mr. De Restand had also visited Neweastle and interviewed the depot-master, but he got no satisfaction. For Mr. Perkins told Dr. John "he'd known Minny Patten from the time she was a little girl, when she played with his little dead Janie Ann, and he couldn't point to tell a black-looking foreigner where she was if he knewed," and he took much pleasure in mystifying the infuriated husband. "Think I am getting senile, for I begin to doubt my best friend. Do you know where Mrs. Minny is, and have you known all the time? I believe you will. I know to the contrary! An honorable man. I shall think you a scoundrel if my suspicions should be verified. At least make Mrs. Restand write to that poor distracted aunt wandering about the world looking for her. It is like uprooting a plant to tear an old woman away from her home."

Oliver wrote a few lines in reply: "You had better return before paroxysms set in; you will be kindly cared for here. Soberly speaking, if I were the man you suggest, I ought to be in the penitentiary. I assure you I know nothing of Mrs. De Restand; I have never heard from her and the fact that I assisted in sending such an irresponsible young person adrift in the world will always be a worriment to me."

So there were many hearts to be lightened by Mrs. Minny's appearance; but of this she had no knowledge. Her lightest moments would have been saddened if she could have seen a gaunt old woman overreaching a shuddering horror in some great city and then venturing timidly to see a dead face in the morgue—an unknown, young and beautiful, fondled. Nor would Mrs. Minny have known herself as pictured by the trembling lips of that fast-fading old woman—"The dearest, prettiest little thing, and as innocent as a child." Truly to disappear in this world is to leave behind a trail of broken hearts and long days of woe and pain. Sad enough in contrast is to be among the missing with no human being left to care, to ask, and to be buried in the potter's field—to have been a bright-eyed baby loved on its mother's breast, hoped for by her fond imagining, dreamed of in the great future, and to be the fulfillment, unclaimed, and gone.

CHAPTER VI.

When the train in which Dr. John was returning to Denver suddenly stopped at a place where there was only the small brown house of a switchman, the doctor looked out of the window with relief. He thought it very hard that on his first trip across the plains in so many years there should be only stupid people in the car, not a congenial soul to talk with and to compare the present times

with the old. Dr. John had crossed the plains in an ox wagon, and he would so have liked to discuss that voyage with some pioneer or newcomer eager to hear about it. He supposed that an accident there had been two stops already about that hot box. A little crowd passed the window carrying something—he could not see what, for those standing around. He earned his neck, his professional instincts aroused.

A worried-looking woman in the door of the brown house seemed to be denying the sufferer entrance with animated gestures and angry shakes of her frowny head. Three white-haired little children hung to her skirts, and she pointed to them in proof of her assertions. Dr. John half rose as the conductor came in the car.

"Is there a doctor here?" the man said, eagerly. "There's a woman very sick; just taken from the day coach. That hag out there wouldn't hardly give her shelter."

"What seems to be the matter?" asked Dr. John, briskly.

The conductor hesitated. "Well, sir, she's a young woman, but I think she's married."

The ladies in the car took up their books in disgust. An elderly, portly man in front of Dr. John buried himself behind his newspaper. Dr. John knew him to be a physician.

"I'm a doctor," said Dr. John, gathering up his belongings. "I shall be glad to see what I can do."

"You may be detained over a train," hesitated the official; "and she's evidently poor—hasn't any baggage."

"I am, fortunately, able to attend to the suffering without having my pay dangled before my eyes to spur me on," said Dr. John, peering the lady reader with looks of disgust.

"Not one of 'em offered even a shawl, and the sick creature I suppose is destitute."

He pushed through the crowd gathered about the house and dispersed them with vigorous English. A pleasant-faced young man handed him a roll of bills.

"I collected that in our Pullman. We're not so heartless as you say," said the doctor. "Look your pardon; before this I thought you were just a dude. I shall tell your mother there is hope for you."

"Thanks," laughed the younger man. "There's twenty-five dollars. I suppose, though, your fees will gobble it all up."

"To the last cent, Jimmy; that's why I got off the car." He shut the door smartly in the face of the crowd, and finding the switchman's wife in the small hall, said, severely: "I suppose you'll call yourself a Christian woman, ma'am."

"There hasn't no meeting-house in this forsaken country nor for forty miles, just plains," she said, sourly, "and having a family of my own, I ain't obliged, if my man do work on the railroad, to take into my house strangers with complaints as may be catching."

"Well, this is, I take it," grinned the doctor. "To your seat."

She smiled a little grimly, and took up her youngest child in a motherly sort of way that pleased the keen observer.

"You've got a kind heart; your tongue runs away with you, that's all. And now do your best for the sick woman. I have plenty of money to pay you."

"I-I put her in my bed," said the woman, shyly. "She's a pretty little thing, and is clean out of her head, but she hasn't no wedding-ring."

"Well, she is married, now, poor girl, for her share in the wrong-doing without you and me saying anything."

"All aboard!" sounded outside. As the train rattled away, Dr. John went softly to the little room where the emigrant woman lay unconscious of this world, so nearly on the threshold of the next.

In the chill gray of an early dawn Dr. John came out in the kitchen, where James Macon, the switchman, sat over the fire. He had been forced to sleep in his chair the long night after a day's work. The hospitality of the poor often means personal deprivation.

"Is she going to live?" asked the man. "I hope so. The baby is a fine boy."

"Both of 'em better dead, if what wife thinks of her is true," sighed the man. "As for the boy, if he must grow up and work as I've done, never givin' no further, he won't thank you for savin' of him."

"He may turn out a great man some day; and then," said Dr. John, half to himself, "she is not a common or uneducated woman; she may be the better for the story of his birth, strive to rise the higher for it."

"Likely not he won't. Them 'yellum children don't amount to much in general. Takes a mighty smart man to come out of the mud."

"Your wife has done nobly by her," said the doctor. "She has the best heart."

"She is kind," muttered the man, "and she has stood about everything a woman can stand. I'll git my own bread and butter, but I'll turn in 'n' sleep with the kids awhile."

The doctor went back to his patient, and Mrs. Macon brought the little bundle out by the stove. Later the children were wild about it. Did the train leave the baby? were they going to have it always? and could they see in the windows of the trains, as they passed, lots of baby faces looking out for mothers to take them?

At night Mrs. Macon woke the doctor, who was taking a nap in the child's bed.

"I think, sir," she said, worriedly, "the little lady is gone out of her head. She's feeling round in the bedclothes for a dog, and calling one pitiful-like."

"I have been a blind fool!" cried the doctor. "I felt all the time I ought to know her." He ran to the sick-room, and, luckily, had some quieting medicine in his case. The sufferer, however, resisted long, as she slept sighed, and one tiny hand felt around nervously, while the other, clinched hard in the sheet, resisted all pressure to open it.

The next morning the white-haired children were very quiet; they played a long way from the house, and towards evening Dr. John kept them by him in the kitchen, telling stories. To this day the youngest one looks in vain for a baby to come by train that shall be his own property, an illusion created by the doctor's stories.

"She's asleep," said Mrs. Macon, coming out, "and here's a little purse I found in her pocket. I couldn't get it before, for loony as she's been all day, she watched me if I went near her things."

A shabby little purse, containing only a five-dollar bill and a card—Craig Oliver's, with his office address.

"I didn't need this to tell me," said the doctor.